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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000214

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [ASEC](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: QARASE CONFIRMED AS FIJI'S PM; MILITARY COMMANDER
UNHAPPY

REF: SUVA 209 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

1. (C) By scraping through to a win in a disputed seat, Prime Minister Qarase's SDL party secured a tiny parliamentary majority in Fiji's national election. Two SDL-oriented independents add cushion. The losing FLP may still sue, but that is an issue only for the longer term. Qarase has announced an offer of major cabinet ministries to the FLP, a surprise which FLP members are now digesting. Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama returned to attacking Qarase in the media today and alleged New Zealand will provide a new RFMF commander soon. The GNZ has denied it. Reportedly, though, Qarase's office is seeking a new ethnic-Fijian commander. After waffling, Bainimarama now intends to follow through on a visit to Hawaii next week, which would appear to indicate he has no immediate plans to take drastic action. End Summary.

SDL wins; Qarase sworn in as PM

2. (U) Laisenia Qarase and his SDL party have won Fiji's general election. The second recount in a suburban Suva seat saw SDL win the seat by 9 votes out of 15,701. That, plus written commitments from both "independent" seat winners, provides Qarase 38 seats in Parliament, compared to the FLP-UPP coalition's 33 seats. On the afternoon of May 19, President Iloilo swore in Qarase for another term as Prime Minister.

Cabinet proposal, with "multi-party" offer

3. (SBU) Qarase wasted no time in announcing his cabinet plans, which, under the Constitution, must include a proportional offer of positions to the FLP. Qarase said that given the FLP won 44% of the seats in Parliament, he has given his SDL parliamentarians 10 cabinet seats and has offered the FLP 7: Agriculture, Commerce and Industry, Energy and Minerals, Environment, Health, Labor, and Local Government. Qarase intends also to name the two independents and a few Senators to cabinet positions, slots which he believes do not have to figure into the SDL/FLP percentages. He envisions a full cabinet of 20 or 21. He asked the FLP to respond by next Monday with a list of 12 names, from which the PM can choose.

4. (C) Comment: Qarase's math is slightly off (the FLP won 43.7% of the seats and the offer is 41.2% of the SDL/FLP portion of cabinet), but the offered positions are important posts, particularly for a domestically-oriented labor party. The offer appears intended to test the FLP's ability to

maintain a chip on its shoulder, and could be read as an olive leaf, though perhaps one which Qarase expects to be declined. FLP leaders have never been known for their conciliatory natures. Still, in a press conference at end of day, FLP leader Chaudhry admitted the offer is "substantial" and one which his caucus will consider. We hear the FLP may decide to accept the cabinet positions, but that Chaudhry may opt to stay away and become Opposition Leader again. End comment.)

FLP still might sue

14. (U) In his press event, Chaudhry complained that the election was "not free and fair," for the various reasons we have reported on previously (refs), and he confirmed the FLP is considering legal action to challenge results. A prime target of any suit would be the constituency where the FLP and minor parties allege 15 ballot boxes suddenly appeared after counting procedures had begun. The FLP lost that seat on preferences. If the result were eventually to be turned around, the SDL would be left with only a minority 35 seats on its own, which would open the possibility of a "no confidence" vote and would put the two independents in position to dictate who governs. Still, for now and at least the immediate future, the Qarase government has the reins of power in Fiji.

Military Commander attacks Qarase yet again

15. (C) Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama told the media today, via radio interviews and a press conference, that Qarase and some other winning SDL candidates have "attacked the military" in recent days, even though "Fiji faces more important issues than fighting the

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military." He argued a focus on the military "does not augur well" for Fiji, which needs to concentrate on "good government." He added that he has heard "through the grapevine that New Zealand is to send a commander of the RFMF to replace me in the next couple of months." He said categorically: "That is not going to happen;" if there is to be a change it would "have to be a local." (Note: The GNZ has put out a press statement denying there has been any such Fiji request.)

A new RFMF leadership option?

16. (C) Prior to the recount result which assured the SDL its slim majority, Bainimarama publicly urged the two independent victors in the election to side with the FLP. Now that Qarase is re-installed as PM, Bainimarama must consider his options. Per septel from Suva DAO, retired RFMF LtCol. Serevakula has urged Bainimarama to try to rebuild bridges to the Qarase government. That would take a great deal of work and self-discipline on Bainimarama's behalf. It would also require receptivity from Qarase, who has no confidence in the Commander. Qarase responded to Bainimarama's public attack today by noting that the new cabinet must "sort out" the situation shortly. Per septel, we have heard that Qarase's office has quietly asked Serevakula to return from his lucrative UN assignment in Afghanistan to take the Commander job. That choice might be palatable to many in the RFMF officer corps, though it would not please Bainimarama. It is not yet clear how Serevakula will respond.

Bainimarama Visit to Hawaii an opportunity

17. (C) A few days ago, Bainimarama shelved plans to visit the Solomon Islands this week. This morning, his staff informed the Embassy that he was also canceling a trip to Hawaii for next week to observe Exercise Tafakula; however, Bainimarama changed his mind a few hours later and now does plan to do the Hawaii trip. That would suggest he does not intend any immediate drastic action at home.

DINGER